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ABSTRACT

A study compared how parents and teachers in the United States, Hong Kong, Nigeria, and Poland ranked in order of importance a list of 8 skills categories for 4-year-olds to learn in preschool. The categories were language skills, motor/physical skills, pre-academic skills, self-assessment skills, self-expression skills, social skills with adults, social skills with children, and self-sufficiency skills. Surveys of teachers and parents in each of the four countries found that teachers in the United States generally ranked social skills with peers as most important, teachers in Nigeria ranked pre-academic skills as first, teachers in Poland ranked motor/physical skills as first, while teachers in Hong Kong ranked self-sufficiency and language skills tied for first place. The study also found that parents in Hong Kong and Nigeria ranked pre-academic skills as first, while parents in the United States and Poland ranked social skills with peers as first. (MDM)

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Reprint from *High/Scope ReSource*
Winter 1995

Patricia P. Olmsted and Shannon Lockhart

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Do Parents and Teachers Agree?

What *Should* Young Children Be Learning?

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One thing is certain about early childhood the world over: From birth to age 5, children grow in many ways and acquire important skills that build a foundation for later development. It is during this time that adults have the greatest influence and play an important role in all aspects of children's lives—socially, cognitively, emotionally, and physically. Because they are generally conscious of this, adults responsible for young children provide and select experiences that they consider to be preparation for future life. These experiences help to socialize children both for life within the formal school system and for life within the larger society.

But *who are* the adults responsible for young children? Today in many countries of the world, the majority of preschool-aged children at times encounter adult caregivers or teachers other than their parents. (See the new publication announcement on this page.) So even in children's very early years, mothers and fathers are not solely responsible for providing the experiences that prepare their children for later life. Children's future lives are also molded in part by the "extraparental" adults who teach and care for them in both informal and formal home settings, in child care centers, and in preschools.

It would seem to be vital—for parents, at least—to know where these extraparental teachers stand, what their beliefs and expectations are concerning young children. Likewise, children's teachers (and we use this term broadly to include all extraparental adults responsible for preschoolers) could possibly be most effective if they understood parents' beliefs and expectations. An ongoing international study that High/Scope is coordinating, the IEA Preprimary Study–Phase 2, is looking into this matter, interviewing parents and teachers of 4-year-olds in 15 countries. This article describes how researchers proceeded and presents some of their findings. Before reading about the findings, however, take a few minutes to complete this exercise:

Take paper and pencil and follow these instructions:

1. Read the eight categories of skills and their descriptions listed in Table 1.

(a) As a *teacher,* which skills do you think are the three *most* important ones for preschool-aged children to learn? On your paper, list these three and number them 1, 2, and 3, in order of importance (with 1 being the most important).

(b) Now, from Table 1, choose the three *least* important skills and list them, numbering them 6, 7, and 8, in order of importance (with 8 being the least important of all).

(c) Next, look at the two remaining categories in Table 1 and list them as numbers 4 and 5 (with 4 being the more important of those two).

2. Now put yourself in the role of a *parent,* and complete the same activity. (If you are not a parent, think of child you have a close relationship with, and complete the task as though you were a parent of that child.)

3. Now compare your *teacher* list with your *parent* list. Are the same categories listed as 1, 2, and 3 (most important) on both lists? Are the same categories listed as 6, 7, and 8 (least important) on both lists?

This set of questions is similar to part of the *Expectations/Beliefs Questionnaire* administered by IEA researchers to parents and teachers (or caregivers) around the world in an attempt to determine what they think about the kinds of experiences 4-year-old children should have to prepare them for school and for life in general.

Table 2 lists the actual questions asked of teachers (a similar list of questions was presented to parents.) To answer the first question in Table 2, teachers went through an exercise like the one you just completed, rank-ordering the same eight skill categories that you ordered from 1 to 8.

The second question focused on the skill categories that the teacher listed as numbers 1, 2, and 3 (the three most important). For *each of these categories,* the teacher was asked to examine a list of several *subskills* and select the two most important of those.

The third question asked the teacher to surmise what a *parent* would rank as numbers 1, 2, and 3 of the skill categories in Table 1. (In the parent-version of this question, of course, the shoe was on the other foot, with the parent estimating what a teacher would rank as 1, 2, and 3.)

The fourth question has two parts. It gets at the teacher's beliefs about (1) what skills she or he is responsible

for helping the child to develop and (2) what skills the parent is responsible for helping the child to develop. (In the parent-version of this question, parents are asked to describe their beliefs about this division of responsibility.)

In an unprecedented cross-national undertaking, these questions are being asked of parents and teachers in Belgium, China, Finland, Greece, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Thailand, and the United States. This is being accomplished through a network of research coordinators and interviewers, each working within his or her own country. High/Scope has worked with the 15 national research coordinators to develop sampling plans, study methods, and instruments, and is now involved in analysis and write-up of data. (To gain an appreciation of the intricacies of instrument development, see "The Challenges of Cross-National Interviewing," on page 9.)

As a preliminary glimpse at the findings (High/Scope will also publish monographs detailing study results), this article presents some questionnaire answers from teachers and parents in the United States and four other locations: Hong Kong (whose statistics are often used in comparisons involving the U.S. and other Pacific Rim countries), Nigeria (a populous nation comprising both rural agricultural and urban industrialized areas, and the only African nation taking part in the study), and Poland (one of the three Eastern European nations taking part in the study).

How Teachers Rank the Eight Categories

Focusing on just the **two most important** and the **two least important** categories, Table 3 shows how U.S., Hong Kong, Nigerian, and Polish teachers ranked the eight skill categories that you ranked in the opening exercise (Table 1 categories). You might find it interesting to compare their rankings with your own.

First, in looking at Table 3, notice that the category of **language skills** (clear verbal expression) is ranked in the "top two" by teachers in three of the four countries. However, not every country's teachers rank language skills as number one in importance: Teachers in the U.S. think that **social skills with peers** come first, and teachers in Nigeria think that **preacademic skills** (getting ready for reading, writing, and arithmetic) come first; teachers in Hong Kong see language skills as tied for first place with **self-sufficiency skills** (independence, self-care, care of belongings).

Poland's teachers, the only ones *not* ranking language skills in the top two, are unique in seeing **motor/physical skills** as highly important among the eight categories. Compare this with the opinion of U.S. teachers that it is next-to-last in importance (the other two countries ranked it as moderately important, i.e., gave it a 3–6 ranking).

Teachers in the U.S. and Poland do agree on this, however: Young children's **social skills with peers** rank as the very first in importance. Teachers in Hong Kong and Nigeria left this category out of their top two rankings and instead assigned it only moderate importance (rank 3–6). (Note that along with language skills, social skills with peers is the only category appearing in more than a single country's top two.)

Now switching to what teachers ranked as having low importance (what they ranked 7 or 8 among the eight categories), we see this: **Preacademic skills** (readiness for reading, writing, and arithmetic) were ranked in the "bottom two" by teachers in all but one of the four countries (recall that it was ranked of first importance in Nigeria). **Self-assessment skills** (sense of accomplishment, self-confidence) received a bottom-two ranking in two of the four countries (Nigeria and Poland); U.S. and Hong Kong teachers also did not give self-assessment skills extremely high ranking, but they did consider such skills moderately important for 4-year-olds (ranked 3–6).

Overall, of the eight skill categories ranked by teachers, three—**preacademic, motor/physical,** and **self-sufficiency**—evoked strong reactions, appearing on the teachers' lists as either highly important or as relatively unimportant (i.e., these three were *not* judged of moderate—rank 3–6—importance by teachers in the U.S., Hong Kong, Nigeria, or Poland). But as our discussion has pointed out, any given one of these three categories varied widely in its ranking. For example, whereas self-sufficiency is considered of *prime* importance in one country (Hong Kong), it is considered of the *very least importance* in another (Nigeria); preacademic skills, while ranked *first* in Nigeria, are ranked *last* in Poland and the U.S.; and, of course, the wide disparity between U.S. and Polish teachers' rankings of motor/physical skills was pointed out earlier.

How Parents Rank the Eight Categories

But what about the parents' rankings of the eight skill categories? Table 4 presents the two categories of most importance (ranks 1 and 2) and the two categories of least importance (ranks 7 and 8)—as *parents* in the four countries see them.

Before comparing parent and teacher opinions, a look at Table 4 alone reveals something about country-to-country agreement or disagreement. Notice that parents in three countries (the U.S., Hong Kong, and Nigeria), consider **language skills** high-ranking in importance; parents in two countries (Hong Kong and Nigeria) ranked **preacademic skills** very high; and parents

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in two countries (the U.S. and Poland) ranked **social skills with peers** very high. Across the four countries, parents' top two categories focused mostly on the three kinds of skills just cited. Only the **motor/physical skills** category, which Polish parents ranked second-most important, is highly ranked by just a single country. So parents in the four countries do not differ very widely in what they think is most important for their 4-year-olds. A look at the bottom half (the "unimportant" categories) of Table 4, however, shows much more "scatter"—with six different categories occurring among all the parents' nominations for numbers 7 and 8 in importance.

How Well Do Teachers and Parents Agree?

Comparing teachers' and parents' rankings in each country is intriguing. For example, inspecting the U.S. columns in Tables 3 and 4 shows that teachers and parents agree on which two skill categories are most important (**language skills** and **social skills with peers**). They also agree on one of the categories that they consider relatively unimportant—each group ranks **motor/physical skills** in their "bottom two." Teachers, however,included **preacademic skills** as the very leastimportant, while parents gave it a moderate (3–6) rating.

Hong Kong teachers and parents compare in this way: They agree about one of the most important skill categories (both ranking **language skills** in their top two). They also agree that **social skills with adults** is among the bottom two in importance. But note that they differ widely in their assessment of **preacademic skills**, with parents ranking it number 1 and teachers ranking it number 7 in importance.

The agreement between Nigerian teachers and parents is nearly perfect, with only a minor difference in their choices of what should rank as 7 and 8 in importance. But notice that both groups include **self-sufficiency skills** in their bottom two categories.

Poland's teachers and parents are in similar agreement. Notably, parents as well as teachers, assign high importance to motor/physical skills, whereas both teachers and parents in the other three countries saw this skill category as moderately important or unimportant for 4-year-olds.

What Can We Conclude?

What cultural, ethnic, or historical factors are at work here is a question currently being explored with the IEA Preprimary Project coordinators in each country. Why do Poland's teachers and parents attach such high importance to the motor/physical skills, for example? Why do Nigeria's parents as well as teachers assign preacademic skills first importance but see little need to stress 4-year-olds' development of self-sufficiency skills? Why do self-expression skills (arts, crafts, music, dance) receive such low ranking in some countries? Why do preacademic skills run the gamut from first to last place, depending on the country?

Important research questions that arise are these: Is it better if young children's teachers and parents agree or disagree on what is important for 4-year-old development? Does **high agreement** ease the child's transition from the preschool environment to formal schooling? Does it perhaps also have a negative effect by narrowing the range of experiences that adults provide for the child? Does **low agreement** make the child's transition to school more difficult? Or does it mean that between them, parents and teachers will end up benefiting the child even more, by providing a greater *variety* of experiences as preparation for life both in and out of school?

IEA Preprimary Project researchers will look at various types of data to help them explore these questions. Data gathered from observations of early childhood settings, both formal and informal, will allow them to compare teacher beliefs with teacher practices. And child assessment data will help them to relate teacher and parent beliefs and practices to children's actual development. For the valuable answers it will furnish, the IEA Preprimary Project is a study to watch!

The IEA Preprimary Project has been described in two earlier issues of *ReSource*. Reprints of those articles and other descriptive information about the study can be requestedfrom Patricia Olmsted, Deputy International Coordinator of the project, 1-313-485-2000, ext. 226. To order the Project's Phase 1 publications, *How Nations Serve Young Children* (Cat. #WR1029, $29.95) or *Families Speak* (Cat. #WR1038, $29.95) call 1-800-40-PRESS, fax 1-800-422-4FAX.

Table 1
Categories of Skills

Category	Description
Language skills	Child learns to express his/her thoughts and feelings verbally in a clear and appropriate manner.
Motor/physical skills	Child improves his/her coordination, balance, and agility through large-muscle activities.
Preacademic skills	Child learns basic concepts, improves small-muscle coordination, and begins to master skills necessary for reading, writing, and arithmetic.
Self-assessment skills	Child learns to assess his/her own abilities and behaviors, begins to take pride in his/her accomplishments, and develops a sense of self-confidence.
Self-expression skills	Child learns to express him/herself creatively through arts and crafts, music, dance, and/or imaginative play.
Social skills with adults	Child learns to listen to, cooperate with, and respect adults.
Social skills with peers	Child learns to share and cooperate with other children, to respect them, and to understand their feelings.
Self-sufficiency skills	Child learns to be independent and to care for him/herself and his/her belongings in a responsible manner.

Table 2
Teacher Expectations/Beliefs Questions

1. What are the most important skills you think children should learn between the ages of 3 and 5? (Refer to beginning activity in which eight skill categories are ordered according to importance.)
2. Here is a list of subskills in the category you ranked as number 1 (or 2, or 3). From this list, please choose the two subskills you think are most important for children to learn between the ages of 3 and 5.
3. From the original eight categories of skills, please choose the three you believe most of the parents/guardians of children in your setting think are the most important ones for their children to do (or learn) when they are 4 years old, and rank them in order of importance.
4. We realize that both teachers and parents play an important role in teaching children. Of the eight categories of skills, please choose the three you consider most important in terms of your responsibility for teaching the children, and rank them in order of importance.

   Now from the group of eight, choose the two categories that you think are most important in terms of the parent's responsibility for teaching his/her child, and rank them in order of importance.

Table 3
Most and Least Important Skills for 4-Year-Olds to Learn—According to Their Teachers

Rating	U.S. (116 Teachers)	Hong Kong (51 Teachers)	Nigeria (81 Teachers)	Poland (124 Teachers)
Most important (#1)	Social skills with peers	Language skills Self-sufficiency skills*	Preacademic skills	Social skills with peers
Second-most important (#2)	Language skills		Language skills	Motor/physical skills
Next-to-least important (#7)	Motor/physical skills	Preacademic skills	Self-assessment skills	Self-assessment skills
Least important (#8)	Preacademic skills	Social skills with adults	Self-sufficiency skills	Preacademic skills

*These were tied for first place.

Table 4
Most and Least Important Skills for 4-Year-Olds to Learn—According to Their Parents

Rating	U.S. (449 Parents)	Hong Kong (198 Parents)	Nigeria (208 Parents)	Poland (458 Parents)
Most important (#1)	Social skills with peers	Preacademic skills	Preacademic skills	Social skills with peers
Second-most important (#2)	Language skills	Language skills	Language skills	Motor/physical skills
Next-to-least important (#7)	Social skills with adults	Social skills with adults	Self-sufficiency skills	Self-expression skills
Least important (#8)	Motor/physical skills	Self-expression skills	Self-expression skills	Preacademic skills

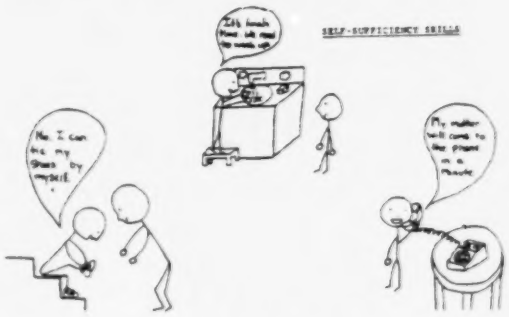
"The Challenges of Cross-National Interviewing"

Undertaking a study in a single country presents many challenges to a researcher. When a study is conducted in several countries, the challenges increase dramatically. The translation of questionnaire items and the use of appropriate photographs and drawings are but two of the difficulties faced. This is how those difficulties were resolved in the collection of the *Expectations/Beliefs Questionnaire* data from teachers and parents in different countries:

First, after the research coordinators from the participating nations agreed on the skill categories and their definitions (in Table 1), the coordinators translated the category names and definitions into their respective languages in a "functionally equivalent" manner—rather than using identical wording. In some countries, the language's word-order requirements or the use of written characters other than letters (as in China) made the translation from English a challenging task.

Second, the 15 coordinators developed picture-cards illustrating each skill category, to facilitate data collection from nonliterate or semiliterate parents. After a basic set of pictures was agreed on by all, each coordinator adapted the pictures to fit the families and children in his or her nation. The picture cards for the self-sufficiency skills are presented here, showing the versions that national coordinators developed in three countries—the United States, Italy, and South Korea.

The United States picture card used stick figures of children and adults to avoid depicting any single ethnic or cultural group. (Pilot-testing indicated that U.S. parents were familiar with stick figures.) The U.S. card illustrates the self-sufficiency subskills of dressing self, attending to personal needs, and appropriate use of a telephone. The Italian coordinator chose to picture two of the three self-sufficiency subskills used in the U.S. card (i.e., dressing self, attending to personal needs) and to use more life-like drawings of children and adults. The South Korean picture card included four self-sufficiency subskills (dressing self, attending to personal needs, keeping things in order, picking up after self by putting toys away) and used life-like drawings.



United States

Italy

South Korea

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